



“A STUDY OF CONTROVERSIAL BRAND CAMPAIGNS AND ADVERTISEMENTS: BREAKING OR BUILDING THE BRAND IMAGE: EXAMINING PUBLIC PERCEPTION IN THE DIGITAL ERA”

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ABSTRACT

This research paper investigates the impact of controversial advertisements on brand perception in India's culturally diverse and sensitive society, focusing on how consumers perceive such ads and their influence on brand image. Using a mixed-method approach, the study combines structural content analysis of ten notable controversial Indian ads with a quantitative survey assessing public responses across demographics.

Findings reveal that advertisements addressing sensitive themes like religion, gender roles, and cultural norms often provoke offence, leading to public outrage and reputational harm. While some campaigns successfully capture attention and generate buzz, many socially driven ads are misinterpreted, especially when challenging traditional beliefs. The research highlights the powerful role of social media in amplifying controversies, where a single post can trigger viral debates, increasing both support and backlash. This underscores the importance for brands to actively monitor online discourse and respond swiftly to criticism. The study emphasises the necessity of clear, culturally sensitive messaging, urging brands to balance creativity with social responsibility to avoid violating audience values or ethical standards. Ultimately, it concludes that thoughtful communication strategies and timely crisis management are vital for maintaining brand credibility and effectively navigating public sentiment in controversial advertising within the digital era.

KEYWORDS: Controversial Advertising, Brand Perception, Brand Image, Cultural Sensitivity, Social Media Backlash, Public Perception, Digital Media, Advertising Ethics, Consumer Trust

INTRODUCTION

1 Aim of the Study

This study aims to explore how controversial advertisements influence public perception of brands in the digital era, with a focus on the Indian market. It investigates the dual nature of controversy as a marketing strategy, whether it effectively captures attention and generates buzz or harms brand reputation and consumer trust. The research further examines the role of social media in shaping and amplifying public reactions and how different demographic groups interpret controversial content based on cultural values and peer influence. Finally, it assesses how brands manage backlash and attempt to rebuild their image post-controversy, an area often overlooked in prior studies.

2 Concept of Controversial Advertisement

Controversial advertisements are those that violate advertising standards or offend certain groups by misrepresenting gender roles, sexuality, or cultural values. They often promote stereotypes or challenge entrenched social and religious norms, eliciting strong public criticism and sometimes legal consequences. Known as “shock advertising,” these campaigns aim to provoke emotional responses and generate discussion but risk damaging brand reputation and consumer trust. Such ads may include social commentary on sensitive issues like body image, race, or gender equality, often employing provocative

visuals to capture attention.

3 Social Media Impact

Social media has become a powerful platform for communication, personal expression, and information sharing, playing a vital role in marketing and brand promotion. It influences communication styles, cultural norms, and public opinion by enabling rapid, wide dissemination of messages. Unlike traditional media, social media allows controversial campaigns to spread instantly, with immediate public feedback and viral potential, significantly increasing their reach and impact.

Social media algorithms amplify trending content, especially provocative ads that evoke strong emotions like anger or curiosity, encouraging users to engage and share. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and X promote content with high likes and comments, shaping public opinion effectively. The #MeToo campaign exemplifies social media's power to propagate messages and influence societal views, demonstrating how online platforms can drive global movements and shape discourse around sensitive issues.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1. Shockvertising -Viewers' Visual Communication Perspectives of a Controversial Skincare Advertisement.

This study investigates Malaysian viewers' perceptions of a controversial skincare ad using Lester's Six Perspectives of Visual Communication, cultural, ethical, technical, and critical, through a quantitative survey of 250 diverse respondents. Findings show that personal, technical, and ethical perspectives strongly influence impressions of the ad's controversy, while cultural sensitivity shapes perceptions, though critical and cultural perspectives are less linked to controversy. Gender did not significantly affect responses, indicating shared views across male and female audiences.

The research highlights the crucial role of cultural context in judging the ethicality and acceptability of visual ads, especially those addressing sensitive themes like marriage and beauty standards in Malaysia. It emphasises the need for context-specific analysis in controversial advertising, offering insights for advertisers and regulators to balance creativity with cultural respect. Future studies could expand sample sizes and explore varied media to deepen understanding of cultural and ethical dynamics in advertising.

2. A Review of Controversial Advertising as a Tool for Brand Promotion in India This research paper examines controversial advertising as a critical branding tool in India, focusing on how brands use high-risk tactics like shock advertising to boost brand recognition and loyalty. Applying the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), the study explains that most controversial ads rely on peripheral cues to influence audience perception rather than thoughtful message processing. Through case studies, it finds that while such ads can significantly increase brand awareness, about half are withdrawn due to public and regulatory backlash. The paper stresses the need for advertisers to balance creativity with societal norms to avoid negative impacts and ensure sustainable brand growth.

3. How 'Offensive' is Offensive? A Closer Look at Controversial Advertisements

This study examines the complexities of offensiveness in advertisements, focusing on gender discrimination and stereotypes. Using theories like Uses and Gratification, Social Responsibility, and Self-Constraint, it explores why ads are seen as offensive across different cultural, gender, and age groups. Findings show consumers are increasingly critical, with past ads now viewed as problematic due to growing social awareness. While ad quality has improved, perceptions of offensiveness remain subjective, shaped by individual and societal norms. The study encourages critical reflection on advertising ethics by both viewers and advertisers.

RESEARCH GAP

Previous research on controversial advertisements has largely focused on audience perceptions and ethical issues, overlooking the strategic brand intent behind such campaigns, especially in India's culturally sensitive context. Additionally, there is limited analysis of how brands manage post-public backlash through crisis communication and digital media engagement.

This study addresses these gaps by conducting a structural content analysis of ten controversial ads to explore brand intent

and audience interpretation using cross-cultural communication theory. Employing a mixed-method approach, it also evaluates brand responses to controversies, assessing their effectiveness in maintaining trust and loyalty in the digital era.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To understand the impact of controversy on brand reputation and public perception of the brand.
2. To examine the long-term impact on brand loyalty and audience trust
3. To assess whether controversial ads are used as a tool for brand promotion and brand awareness
4. To conduct a comprehensive analysis of ethical standards being maintained or violated by the brands.
5. To analyse how social media engagement amplifies public reactions to controversial ads.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How do controversial advertisements affect brand reputation and brand image in the digital era?
2. Are controversial advertisements strategically used by brands to enhance visibility and promote brand awareness?
3. To what extent do controversial advertisements violate ethical and cultural standards, and what are the consequences for brands?
4. What role does social media play in amplifying public reactions to controversial advertisements?
5. How do brands manage crises and respond to public backlash following controversial advertisements?

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative Content Analysis

This study employs structural content analysis to examine elements in Indian advertisements from 2015 to 2025 that triggered controversy, impacted brand image, and elicited audience reactions. By identifying themes and visual elements, the study explores factors provoking controversy and how brands intended their messages. This dual focus on brand intent and public perception reveals gaps between communication goals and audience interpretation, providing insights into how controversial ads influence brand reputation in the digital age.

Sampling for Qualitative Analysis

Ten controversial advertisements and campaigns criticised for offensiveness were conveniently selected for structural content analysis, representing a diverse range of brands and themes.

Quantitative Survey Method

To assess if controversial advertising builds brand awareness and its long-term effects on brand image and trust, a survey was conducted across diverse demographic groups. The survey aimed to capture public perceptions of brand reputation following controversial ads, including the influence of social media backlash and online discussions. Responses from different age, gender, and educational backgrounds provide varied perspectives on these campaigns.

Sampling for Quantitative Analysis

The survey included 169 respondents aged 18 to 35 and above,

with 108 females and 60 males, selected through convenient sampling.

VARIABLES

Independent variables: Age, gender, and qualification were chosen to analyse demographic influences on perceptions and reactions.

Dependent variables: Controversial advertisements and audience reactions were studied to understand their correlation and impact.

Theoretical Framework

The Cross-Cultural Communication Theory explains that culture, comprising beliefs, values, norms, and practices, deeply shapes how individuals interpret messages. In diverse societies like India, varying cultural backgrounds influence communication styles and message reception. This theory stresses the need for brands to tailor advertising to respect cultural sensitivities, reducing backlash and protecting brand image. Meaning is co-created by both sender and receiver within their cultural contexts, making cultural awareness essential for effective advertising in heterogeneous societies.

This theory is particularly relevant here, as it helps explain why ads addressing religion, gender roles, and traditions often provoke strong public reactions. It supports the study's aim to explore how cultural diversity shapes audience interpretation and backlash, emphasising culturally sensitive messaging to maintain brand reputation.

The Two-Step Flow Theory posits that media messages influence public opinion indirectly: opinion leaders first interpret and share information through interpersonal communication, rather than audiences being directly influenced by mass media. In the digital era, social media opinion leaders amplify discussions around controversial ads, shaping broader public perception and potentially escalating controversies into crises. This theory highlights that brand reputation depends not only on ad content but also on how it is discussed within social networks. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive framework to analyse the cultural and social dynamics influencing public reception of controversial advertising in India.

ANALYSIS

QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

A structural content analysis was conducted on ten randomly selected controversial Indian advertisements known for generating significant public backlash. Each ad was examined across five dimensions: central theme, visual elements, brand's intended message, public response, and the brand's reaction post-controversy.

1. OYO Print Advertisement 2025

OYO's 2025 print ad with the tagline "Bhagwan har jagah hain, aur OYO bhi" ("God is everywhere, and so is OYO") aimed to highlight its presence in pilgrimage sites. However, many Hindu groups found the comparison disrespectful, sparking widespread outrage and the trending hashtag #BoycottOYO on

social media. The simple text-based ad intensified backlash by focusing attention on the controversial metaphor. In response, OYO apologised, clarifying that the intent was to promote religious tourism, not offend. The company expressed respect for India's diverse faiths and emphasised the importance of cultural sensitivity. This controversy damaged OYO's brand image, illustrating the risks of merging religious themes with commercial messaging.

2. Flipkart 2023

Flipkart's 2023 Big Billion Day promotional ad featured a meme-inspired, anime-style animation depicting a humorous husband-and-wife scenario. The woman humorously calls her husband "Aalsi" (lazy), "Kambakkht" (worthless), and "Bewakoof Pati" (dumb husband) while finding creative spots to hide her growing collection of handbags bought from Flipkart. Social media criticism intensified, with the National Council for Men's Affairs condemning the portrayal of husbands as lazy and dumb. Some also interpreted the wife's hiding of a "special friend" as implying infidelity. In response to the backlash, Flipkart issued a prompt apology, stating the ad was posted inadvertently and assuring the public that stricter measures would be taken to prevent similar issues in the future.

3. Bharth Matrimony Holi ad 2023

Bharath Matrimony's Holi-themed advertisement aimed to highlight the issue of women's safety during the festival, portraying the contrast between Holi's joyful spirit and the harassment some women face. The emotionally charged ad showed a woman washing off Holi colours to reveal bruises, symbolising lasting trauma. While the brand intended to promote a safe and inclusive celebration, the ad sparked backlash from some who felt it unfairly targeted a Hindu festival, leading to calls for a boycott. Despite the criticism, Bharath Matrimony stood by its message, clarifying that the intent was to raise awareness and foster a respectful environment without insulting any religion, emphasising that everyone deserves to celebrate festivals like Holi without fear or harm.

4. Layer'r Shot 2022

Layer'r Shot's 2022 perfume ads used humour and wordplay to promote masculinity but were widely condemned for normalizing sexual aggression and rape culture. Featuring suggestive dialogue in intimate settings, the ads sparked outrage for insensitivity toward women. The Information & Broadcasting Ministry ordered their removal from Twitter and YouTube, and ASCI suspended them for violating ethical advertising codes. Layer'r Shot apologised for offending women's modesty, denied intent to promote male dominance, and withdrew the ads from all platforms.

5. Manyavar Mohey Kanya daan 2021

Manyavar Mohey's ad challenged the traditional Hindu wedding ritual of Kanya Daan by promoting "Kanya Maan," emphasising respect and dignity for daughters rather than treating them as a burden to be given away. Featuring Alia Bhatt, the ad highlighted daughters' feelings of displacement and called for equality in marriage. While intended to support women's empowerment, it faced backlash from Hindu

communities accusing the brand of disrespecting religious customs, sparking the #BoycottManyavar trend. The brand clarified its intent was to promote respect and equality without offending traditions, urging a modern, inclusive perspective on marriage rituals.

6. Sabyasachi 2021

In 2021, Sabyasachi launched its “Mangalsutra” campaign on Instagram to redefine traditional jewellery advertising by showcasing the Mangalsutra in a modern, inclusive context. The campaign featured women in contemporary outfits and same-sex couples wearing the Mangalsutra, aiming to celebrate womanhood and evolving cultural norms. However, it faced severe backlash for being deemed “obscene” and disrespectful to Hindu culture, with political figures like Madhya Pradesh Home Minister Narottam Mishra demanding its withdrawal. Under pressure and threats of legal action, Sabyasachi withdrew the campaign within hours, expressing disappointment over the misinterpretation but emphasising the original intent of inclusivity and empowerment.

7. Fem Cream 2021

Dabur’s 2021 Karwa Chauth ad featured a same-sex female couple celebrating the festival, using Fem cream face masks as part of their ritual. The ad aimed to promote inclusivity and break stereotypes by showing love beyond gender boundaries, linking tradition with modern acceptance. Visually, it portrayed emotional, respectful moments without men, emphasising universal love. However, the ad sparked backlash for allegedly disrespecting Hindu traditions, leading Madhya Pradesh’s Home Minister to demand its removal. Dabur apologised, clarifying their intent to promote inclusion, and withdrew the ad to respect cultural sentiments, despite support from some for its bold message of LGBTQ+ pride.

8. Tanishq’s Ekatvam 2020

Tanishq, a TATA brand, released an ad promoting interfaith marriage, showing a Muslim family celebrating a Hindu daughter-in-law’s baby shower to launch their “Ekatvam” jewellery collection. The ad emphasised unity, love, and religious acceptance through cultural harmony and subtle jewellery placement. However, it faced backlash accusing it of promoting “Love Jihad” and fake secularism, with #BoycottTanishq trending on social media. Despite praise for its positive message, the brand withdrew the ad to respect public sentiment and protect employee safety amid online trolling and controversy. The ad highlighted challenges in addressing cultural sensitivities in India.

9. Zomato’s MC BC Billboard 2017

Zomato’s billboard campaign used “MC” and “BC” to represent Mac n’ Cheese and Butter Chicken, also Hindi slang, intending witty wordplay. The minimalist design featured bold text to spark attention. However, the humour missed the mark, leading to criticism for being offensive and sexist. Social media backlash damaged Zomato’s image, with users questioning the brand’s creative choices. Co-founder Pankaj Chaddah apologised, admitting the ad was misaligned with brand values. The billboard was promptly removed to protect and restore the

brand’s reputation.

10. Kalyan Jewellers 2015

Kalyan Jewellers’ print ad featuring Aishwarya Rai as a royal figure aimed to evoke timeless beauty and luxury, showing her with an underage dark-skinned child holding an umbrella. The brand intended to depict royalty and elegance, not racism or child labour. However, the ad was widely condemned for promoting child labour and racism, sparking social media outrage. Kalyan Jewellers apologised on Facebook, withdrew the ad, and admitted their creative team failed to properly convey the intended royal theme, acknowledging the controversy caused.

FINDINGS OF QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

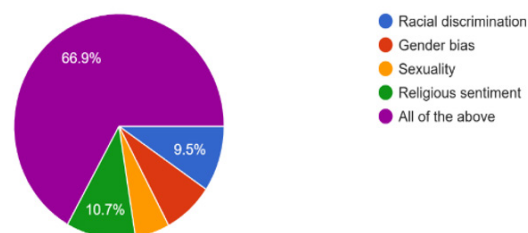
A qualitative analysis of ten controversial Indian ads from 2015 to 2025 reveals high audience sensitivity to cultural and religious themes. Four ads blending religious or cultural practices with modern or Western views, like Manyavar Mohey’s “Kanya Daan” and Sabyasachi’s “Mangalsutra,” faced protests and boycott calls, with the latter withdrawn over accusations of indecency.

Religion remains especially sensitive; Tanishq’s interfaith marriage ad was accused of promoting “Love Jihad,” sparking backlash despite ethical compliance. Gender portrayals also triggered controversy, as seen in L’Oréal Shot and Flipkart ads. Other contentious campaigns included Zomato’s provocative billboard and Kalyan Jewellers’ racially insensitive ad. These cases underscore the need for brands to balance creativity with cultural and ethical responsibility to maintain trust and reputation.

QUANTITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

Data collection: A Google form was sent to contacts and students with a set of questions related to controversial advertising and its impact. The study received 169 responses.

In your opinion what makes the advertisements controversial or offensive?
169 responses



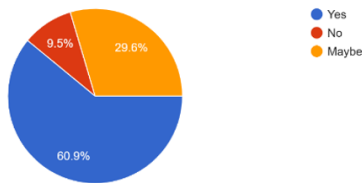
The study showed that 113 respondents find elements like racial discrimination, gender bias, sexuality, and religious sentiment offensive in ads. Fewer respondents were sensitive to only one aspect: 18 to religious sentiment, 16 to racial discrimination, 13 to gender bias, and 9 to sexuality. This aligns with your interest in how controversial ads affect brand perception in India, especially regarding cultural and religious sensitivities.

The study revealed that 30 respondents said their loyalty and trust in a brand with a controversial ad would strongly decrease, while 64 said it would decrease somewhat. Meanwhile, 51

reported no change in trust, 16 said it would increase, and 8 said it would strongly increase.

Do you think brands and advertisers intentionally use controversial ads to grab attention and create buzz in the market?

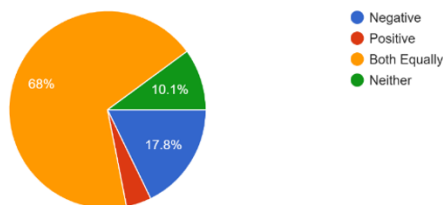
169 responses



The study reveals that 103 respondents believe brands intentionally use controversial ads to generate buzz, 16 think it's unintentional, and 50 are unsure about the brands' intentions.

Do you think social media amplifies the negative or positive reactions to controversial advertisements?

169 responses



The study shows 115 respondents believe social media amplifies both positive and negative reactions to controversial ads, 30 feel it mainly amplifies negative reactions, 7 think it spreads positive responses, and 17 say social media has no significant impact on public reaction. This highlights social media's powerful role in shaping public discourse around controversial advertising.

FINDINGS OF QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

Survey Demographics: The study surveyed 169 individuals, including 108 females, 60 males, and 1 of undisclosed gender. Most respondents were aged 18–29, with the majority being undergraduates or postgraduates, and a few holding higher qualifications.

Offensive Content: Racial discrimination, sexuality, gender bias, and religious sentiment seen as controversial.

Brand Loyalty & Perception: Majority report decreased trust and loyalty after controversial ads; about 30% unsure; a small group supports bold messaging.

Marketing Tool: Half believe controversy is a deliberate strategy to gain attention; others disagree or are uncertain.

Ad Perception: Around half felt offended by ads like Tanishq's Ekatvam and OYO's print ad; some viewed these as misinterpreted.

Social Media Impact: 60% don't actively share controversial ads but notice backlash; 68% say social media amplifies reactions; only 30% say it affects their brand perception.

Ethical Expectations: Most expect brands to uphold social responsibility; the majority oppose crossing ethical boundaries for publicity; 16% prioritise growth over ethics.

Discussion

RQ1: How do controversial advertisements affect brand perception and brand image in the digital era?

Controversial ads involving religion, gender, or sexuality often trigger strong negative reactions despite intentions to promote inclusivity. This gap between brand intent and audience perception is explained by Cross-Cultural Communication Theory, highlighting how cultural values shape interpretation. Even ethically compliant ads can face backlash if they clash with traditional norms, harming brand reputation. Social media accelerates backlash, but not all consumers alter their trust based on online discussions, showing mixed impacts on brand perception.

RQ2: Are controversial advertisements strategically used by brands to enhance visibility and promote brand awareness?

Many controversial ads are deliberately designed to attract attention and generate buzz, supported by both qualitative analysis and survey data. While controversy can boost short-term visibility, it often risks long-term reputational damage. Brands like Zomato and Layer'r Shot gained attention but suffered backlash, illustrating controversy as a double-edged sword that can increase awareness but erode trust.

RQ3: To what extent do controversial advertisements violate ethical and cultural standards, and what are the consequences for brands?

Not all controversies stem from ethical breaches; some ads like Tanishq's and Manyavar Mohey's complied with codes but faced backlash due to cultural sensitivity issues. Others, such as Layer'r Shot and Kalyan Jewellers, violated ethical norms like gender insensitivity or racial undertones, leading to ad withdrawals. This underscores that ethical compliance alone is insufficient; brands must also respect cultural contexts to avoid boycotts and reputational harm.

RQ4: What role does social media play in amplifying public reactions to controversial advertisements?

Social media platforms rapidly amplify public sentiment, spreading both outrage and support within hours. Cases like Bharath Matrimony and Sabyasachi demonstrate how backlash can escalate to boycotts and media scrutiny. According to the Two-Step Flow Theory, peer influence shapes individual reactions more than media itself. Social media acts as an amplifier rather than a sole influencer of brand perception, with some consumers maintaining their views despite viral criticism.

RQ5: How do brands manage crises and respond to public backlash following controversial advertisements?

Most brands respond by apologising, clarifying intent, and withdrawing ads to protect their reputation, as seen with OYO, Sabyasachi, and Tanishq. However, some, like Bharath Matrimony, choose to stand by their message, defending their ads to uphold their values. This approach can sometimes enhance brand image by demonstrating a commitment to

principles while engaging with public concerns.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the impact of controversial advertisements on brand image and public perception in India's culturally diverse digital era. Advertisements are vital for shaping brand reputation and connecting with audiences, but they must be honest, socially responsible, and culturally sensitive. Even ads adhering to ethical codes like ASCI's can provoke backlash if they clash with deeply rooted traditions and religious sentiments. While controversial ads often challenge cultural, religious, or gender norms and may be seen as bold marketing strategies, they risk misunderstandings, offense, and boycotts. Despite controversies affecting brand reputation, consumer trust and loyalty are not entirely dependent on them.

The research also highlights social media's dual role in amplifying both support and criticism, increasing ad visibility but magnifying negative reactions. However, public opinion is not solely shaped by online discourse. Timely, respectful brand responses to backlash can help rebuild reputation and demonstrate audience respect. Ultimately, the study underscores the need for brands to balance creativity with cultural awareness, ensuring messages resonate respectfully within their target communities. Advertisers should craft sensitive messages and respond thoughtfully to controversies, as brand reputation can suffer even if consumer loyalty remains intact.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Research Sampling: Convenience sampling was used for the survey and case studies, limiting the diversity of perspectives. Most participants belonged to specific age groups and educational backgrounds, resulting in a homogenous, one-dimensional viewpoint.

Sample Size Constraint: The survey included 169 respondents, which may not fully capture the diversity of public opinion across demographics.

Geographic and Cultural Focus: The study focused on brands representing region-specific cultural conventions, excluding broader Indian cultural diversity.

Subjectivity in Content Analysis: Qualitative interpretations of brand intent and public reaction may reflect the researcher's perspective despite efforts to maintain objectivity.

FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

Broader Demographics: Future research should include more diverse samples from varied backgrounds to capture a wider range of audience perspectives and reactions.

Broader Sample Size: Increasing the sample size would provide more comprehensive insights and better represent public opinion.

Include Interviews: Adding in-depth interviews or focus groups can offer qualitative insights into the emotional, cultural, and psychological reasons behind audience interpretations of

controversial ads.

Compare Cultural Contexts: Comparative studies between Indian and international audiences could reveal how cultural sensitivity shapes responses to advertisements.

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